LONG MAY OUR LAND BE BRIGHT
WITH FREEDOM'S HOLY LIGHT
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Galatians 5:1, 13, 14
Psalm 33:11, 12

"Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord."
Psalm 33:12 (NRSV)

The great good news about America—the American gospel, if you will —
is that religion shapes the life of the nation without strangling it.
Belief in God is central to the country's experience, yet for the broad center,
faith is a matter of choice, not coercion, and the legacy of the Founding
is that the sensible center holds. It does so because the Founders believed
themselves at work in the service of both God and man, not just one or the other.
. . . They created a nation in which religion should not be singled out for special help
or particular harm. The balance between the promise of the Declaration of Independence,
with its evocation of divine origins and destiny, and the practicalities of the Constitution,
with its checks on extremism, remain perhaps the most brilliant American success.

Jon Meacham
American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation

The issue of the complex relationship between church and state, religion and public life, presents itself in the life of a minister in a frequently recurring telephone call. It's an invitation to deliver an invocation—for the city council or county board, or at a public school graduation, or for the Bar Association's annual banquet or the pipe fitters' convention. As we respond, we are mindful, most of us are, of how complicated this subject is. There's the First Amendment,

guaranteeing freedom of religion and freedom from state-supported, established religion. The Supreme Court has ruled that mandatory prayers in the public schools are unconstitutional. But prayers at the opening of Congress are fine. We are also mindful of who will hear the prayer, in addition to God. In all probability the pipe fitters or lawyers are not all Presbyterians, nor Protestants, nor Christians, for that matter. And so we proceed with caution out onto a veritable legal and theological minefield.

On one memorable occasion I was invited to pray at the Junior High All Sports Banquet. My sons were to receive awards, and the scheduled speaker was Archie Griffin, a Heisman Trophy-winning Ohio State football player. Frankly, I was almost as eager to meet Archie as they were, so I said, “Yes, of course I would pray at the Public Junior High School All Sport Banquet.”

Now I don’t know whether you’ve ever been to one of these wonderful affairs—probably not. They are fairly chaotic. The banquet menu is pizza, boxes and boxes of pizza stacked on a folding table, Cokes, potato chips, and large, flat chocolate cakes with “Congratulations Team” inscribed in white icing, all served on paper plates with plastic utensils. The junior highs line up and help themselves and make their way back to their team tables, their paper plates piled high. It’s noisy. A fair amount of pushing and shoving and spillage occurs. Coaches and parents try, mostly unsuccessfully, to maintain some semblance of order, negotiating their way through the maze of students and pepperoni and cheese pizza on the floor. And in the midst of that wonderfully chaotic scene, the head of the parents’ organization goes to the microphone, tries to quiet everyone down for a moment, and introduces the minister to deliver the invocation. And so we pray, thanking God for the pizza, the coaches, the school, the teachers, Ohio State University, and wonderful young men like Archie Griffin.

It was the only prayer I ever delivered that received an ovation. At the end of the evening, an acquaintance approached me, obviously distressed about something. “You didn’t pray in Jesus’ name,” he said. “Why not?” I explained that I did not pray in Jesus’ name because the assembly was at least one-third Jewish, reflecting the community in which we lived. I said I thought it was the Christian thing to do to respect the religious beliefs of others. He wasn’t buying it for a moment. “You blew it,” he said. “You had an opportunity to witness for Jesus and you missed it.” I tried to respond by saying that respecting the views of others is witnessing to Jesus. He didn’t buy that either. “You sound so Presbyterian,” he concluded as he walked away.

The issue is ever before us: the relationship between religion and public life, church and state, of course, but more than that even. Should there be prayers in Congress, schools, sports banquets? Should there be a Christmas nativity at city hall? Does the addition of a menorah make it all right? Should a politician's religious beliefs influence his or her position on public policy that affects all the people: stem cell research, for instance, or abortion, or same-sex marriage, or family planning?

Jon Meacham, managing editor of *Newsweek,* has written a fine book, *American Gospel: God, the Founding Fathers, and the Making of a Nation*, in which he argues that the Founders intended a nation based on religious conviction which, at the same time, avoids sectarian religion and extends religious freedom to all.

Meacham points out that the Founder's first fight was about faith. "As they gathered for the inaugural session of the Continental Congress on Tuesday, September 6, 1774, at Carpenter's Hall in Philadelphia, Thomas Cushing, a lawyer from Boston, moved that the delegates begin with a prayer. Both John Jay of New York, a devout Episcopalian, and John Rutledge, a South Carolina planter, objected." And so the argument began. Things could have gone either way. They could have resolved the issue by ruling no prayer, no religion, no God-talk, a totally secular state. They did not. Sam Adams rose and said he was no bigot and could hear a prayer from a gentleman of piety and proposed that the Reverend Duche, an Episcopalian clergy, be invited.

Duche appeared the next day and read the psalm for the day, Psalm 35: "Plead my cause, O Lord, with those that strive with me."

John Adams wrote to Abigail that he, and the entire assembly, were "stunned and deeply moved" (pp. 65, 66).

They made a choice—to bring religion in, but with great care not to abridge the freedom of conscience that was absolutely central to their being there in the first place, absolutely central to the Declaration of Independence Thomas Jefferson would write for them, the freedom of conscience that was absolutely foundational to the Constitution and Bill of Rights they and their successors would write a decade or so later.

What did the Founders believe?

Jefferson was a rationalist, an enlightenment thinker, respectful of religion, a believer in God—"Nature's God," he liked to say—in God's Providence, God's ultimate guidance of human history. But he was

also a student of Europe's bloody recent history of religious wars. He wanted none of it. People would be free here to believe or not believe, to belong to whatever church they chose or not; free not to have to support any religion with their taxes. No one had ever tried that before, by the way—a state apart from some established religion, a church free from state support or influence.

Jefferson believed in God, but his theology was less than orthodox. He spent an entire evening in the White House with a copy of the Gospels and a razor, cutting out everything he found to be irrational, implausible. Out went the miracles, the virgin birth, the resurrection; Jefferson found the teachings, the parables, the Sermon on the Mount to his liking.

But he believed in Nature's God and God's guiding hand. As he died—on July 4, by the way, 1826, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence—his family heard him repeat old Simeon's prayer in the Gospel of Luke, said when Simeon saw the infant Jesus: "Lord, lettest now thy servant depart in peace." And Jefferson arranged for his simple grave stone to bear three brief sentences, his proudest achievements:

> The founding of the University of Virginia
> Authorship of the Declaration of Independence
> Authorship of the Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom

Meacham writes, "Neither conventionally devout nor wholly unbelieving, Jefferson staked out an American middle ground between the ferocity of evangelizing Christians on the one side and the contempt for religion of the [French Philosophers] on the other." That middle ground Meacham calls Public Religion, and he argues that it is the glue that binds us together.

What did the Founders believe? Some were orthodox Christians. Some were Deists—like Jefferson and Franklin, who believed in God but were wary of sectarianism. Some were nonbelievers (see *The Faith of the Founding Fathers*, review in the *Christian Century*, David L. Holmes, 27 June 2006).

What they feared most, Meacham says, was the threat of extremism, which would either impose religion on people against their will or oppose religion.

What they believed is represented in our two texts today: the lovely Thirty-Third Psalm in which the God of creation is praised—"the earth is full of the steadfast love of God." But then, the psalmist describes a

meeting of the nations—who are conspiring to overthrow God. God, however, nullifies their plans. God remains as the creator whose will operates ultimately in history, a God of Providence whose hand the Founders saw in the great events of their times. “Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord,” the psalmist wrote, and they would have agreed.

But they also understood the relationship between faith and freedom, that the basis of all liberty is a freedom of heart and conscience, that it is given by God to every human being, and that no earthly power can or should try to abridge that freedom.

St. Paul understood: “For freedom Christ has set us free,” he wrote. “Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.”

Freedom of conscience, religious freedom, is fragile. It needs protecting. The Founders’ fear was that it would be exploited and used by extremists who either would impose their religion on others or voluntarily relinquish it in the name of national security—an argument launched frequently these days—or eliminate it altogether. James Madison said every generation will have to preserve and protect that freedom because every generation will be tempted to reduce it, to limit it, or to give it away.

In our day, the Religious Right portrays the United States as a Christian nation that has lost its way and its specifically Christian identity under the assault of a godless secularism. Its spokespersons pontificate and threaten in precisely the way Madison and Jefferson warned about, using religion to advance a partisan, ideological agenda: using the tragedy of 9/11, for instance, to attack gays and lesbians, reproductive choice, feminism, and the American Civil Liberties Union. Randall Terry could not have been more clear: “Our goal,” he said, “is a Christian nation. We have a biblical duty, we are called by God to conquer the country. We don’t want equal time. We don’t want pluralism.” It’s a popular position today. It sells a lot of books. But it’s wrong. We are not a Christian nation and never were. In 1790, President George Washington wrote to the Jewish congregation in Newport, Rhode Island, that “America gives bigotry no sanction” and favors no religion over another. “In a treaty with the Muslim nation of Tripoli initiated by Washington, completed by John Adams, and ratified by the Senate in 1797, the Founders declared that ‘the Government of the United States is not in any way founded on the Christian Religion’” (Meacham, p.19).

In her fine new book, *The Mighty and the Almighty: Reflections on America, God, and World Affairs*, former Secretary of State Madeline

Albright writes, “We know what a globe plagued by religious strife is like; we do not know what it would be like to live in a world where religious faith is absent. We have, however, had clues from Lenin, Stalin, Mao Zedong, and the Nazis who conjured up a soulless Christianity.”

Albright thinks the great challenge before us is to “harness the unifying potential of faith, while containing its capacity to divide” (p. 66).

“We would be well advised to recall the character of wartime leadership provided by Abraham Lincoln,” she writes. “He did not flinch from fighting in a just cause, but he never claimed a monopoly on virtue. . . . He rejected a suggestion that he pray for God to be on the side of the Union, praying instead for the Union to be on the side of God” (p. 288).

We are blessed, as Christians, to live in a nation devoted to our freedom of conscience, which means our freedom to practice our religion and to follow our Lord Jesus Christ according to the dictates of our hearts, devoted to extending that freedom to all its citizens.

I love something William Sloane Coffin, who died a few months ago, wrote. Coffin loved this country, fought for it in the Second World War, served it as a CIA agent, criticized and demonstrated against it when his conscience required. He wrote, “How do you love America? Don’t say, ‘My Country right or wrong.’ That’s like saying, ‘My grandmother, drunk or sober’; it doesn’t get you anywhere. Don’t just salute the flag and don’t burn it either. Wash it. Make it clean” (*Credo*).

Long may our land be bright
With freedom’s holy light.

Amen.